

CAPITOL & CALIFORNIA

Firms urged to hire ex-inmates

Prison Industry Authority teaches convicts how to work, conference is told.

By Andy Furillo
BEE CAPITOL BUREAU

The old David Harris was a commercial burglar who spent 10 years in prison. The new David Harris is a Los Angeles man who makes his living as an optometric technician and has been crime free for 15 years.

On Tuesday, Harris stood before a roomful of Sacramento business leaders

gathered in a 14th-floor conference room and presented himself as a living example of what vocationally based rehabilitation programs can produce in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Prison, the 51-year-old Harris told his 100-plus listeners, was the best thing that ever happened to him. And the key to his transformation in the joint, he said, was the Prison Industry Authority. It taught him a trade, Harris said, and made him learn how to work.

"It made me feel better as a person," Harris said of his PIA experience. "It

helped me feel better as a man, and it helped that time I was doing fly by. I wasn't laying on my (backside) doing nothing. I wasn't interested in becoming a better criminal. I was interested in becoming a better person."

Harris' talk was part of the PIA pitch to get local business owners to hire more ex-convicts.

These days, the PIA employs 6,000 inmates in 60 enterprises at 23 prisons, learning marketable skills while working in the prison shops that produce some \$200 million in goods every year. In prison, they're learning how to make

shoes and eyeglasses, manufactured houses and assorted textile products, how to run dairies and grow food, how to bind books and bake bread. When they get out, said PIA General Manager Chuck Pattillo, they're ready to work.

"We're not all about making license plates anymore," Pattillo said.

The conference in the California Chamber of Commerce offices in the Esquire Building in downtown Sacramento was held in conjunction with PRIDE Industries, the local job-finding machine for people with disabilities. For

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the past couple of years, PRIDE has teamed with PIA to also try to find work for parolees.

Timing was both good and bad for the conference.

On one hand, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is poised to sign a bill within the next couple of days that seeks to incorporate rehabilitation into the fabric of the prison system, to go along with the \$7.9 billion plan to add 40,000 beds to it and 13,000 more to local jails.

On the other hand, the meeting took place just two days after an ex-convict, while on the job, crashed his diesel carrying a tankload of gasoline and destroyed a key overpass just this side of the Bay Bridge. The truck driver held a hazardous materials license in good standing, according to Department of Motor Vehicles records, and had a clean driving record during the most recent three-year reporting period.

Matt Powers, the former head

of PIA and now the director of re-entry services for PRIDE, said "there are going to be incidents like that." But in weighing the risk that employing former felons entails, society also has to assess the risk of shunting them to the fringe, Powers said.

"It's equally risky for us to just allow men and women to come out of prison with absolutely no job opportunity and essentially wander around until they reoffend," Powers, a former Sacramento deputy police chief, said in an interview. "That's a very risky situation."

Former Assembly Republican leader Patrick Nolan recounted how tough it was for him to reacquaint himself with society when he got out of prison after doing time on a political corruption conviction back in the 1980s. Now the president of the Justice Fellowship, a Bible-based ministry focused on reintegrating offenders into society, Nolan asked the employers to imagine how impossible it

would be for somebody to hit the streets with nothing going for him but his criminal identity.

"Think about the person who gets out of Pelican Bay and is put on a bus at midnight, with a hundred-and-some bucks in his pocket," Nolan said. "He lands here at the Greyhound depot in the middle of the night and he's got to decide where to put his head. Where does he look for a job? He doesn't have an ID. How does he support himself? How does he check into a hotel? How does he get the medications he's run out of by now?"

For starters, Nolan said, it would help if the guy had a job waiting for him.

"It tells him he'll have a place to show up," Nolan said. "Showing up is a big part of things, because if you have some place to show up, you're not hanging out."

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